

A BREAKFAST WITH ALEXANDRE DUMAS.

DURING a temporary absence from my office in Paris one day, in the month of October, 1864, Mr. Dumas called, and not finding me, left the following note :—

Si Monsieur était l'homme que l'on dit, il viendrait déjeuner demain avec moi à St. Gratian Avenue du lac, en prenant le chemin de fer du Nord à 11 heures moins 10 minutes.

Je lui serre bien cordialement la main.

ALEX DUMAS.

I telegraphed an acceptance of his invitation, and on the following morning took the train from the St. Lazaire station, which brought me to Enghien at twelve o'clock, whence I took a cab for St. Gratian. After driving about a quarter of an hour I remarked in front of us a large and rather picturesque-looking man standing in a gateway opening into the front yard of a modest wooden cottage, with his head uncovered and a book in his hand, talking to a passer-by. I recognized at once, from his resemblance to the photographs, the author of *Monte Christo*.

While we were exchanging the common-places which usually inaugurate an acquaintance made for a purpose, I made a hasty but careful survey of my host and his surroundings. Dumas himself, I discovered to my surprise, was over six feet high, and but for an inclination to corpulency, well proportioned. He had all the distinctive characteristics of the African; the brown complexion of the quadroon, crisp, bushy gray hair which no comb could straighten, a head low and narrow in front, but enlarging rapidly as it receded, thick lips, a large mouth, and a throat, all uncovered, of enormous proportions. But for the retreating in all directions of his forehead, his face would have been very handsome for one of its kind, in which the animal nature was in full force. He was dressed in dark pantaloons, a spotted muslin shirt unbuttoned at the throat, and no cravat, and a white flannel round-about with a capote attached, all scrupulously neat. He moved with the alertness of a school boy, talked all the time and rapidly. The cottage which he occupied was hired for the season, simply

furnished, and suggested nothing of interest except the great change in his fortunes since he built his famous villa at St. Germain, and "warmed" it with a festival of six hundred covers, and when his income was over one hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year.

As we had never met before, he took an early opportunity of letting me know his purpose in calling upon me the previous day. He had been told, he said, that if he would go to America and write a story, it would have a great sale there. He wished to know what I thought about it. I replied that he was scarcely better known in France than in America; that he could not write a book that would not sell, and that his welcome in the United States would be all that he could desire. He said that a lawyer in New York, of French origin, whose name I did not distinctly hear, had recommended him to come, and promised him a great success if he would go at that time; that he proposed, if I thought well of it, to leave in about two months, and to be absent four. It occurred to me at once that in the midst of the critical contest going on in America, in which the African race had so much at stake, and where the question of emancipation as a war measure was under discussion, the appearance of one who had done more, perhaps, than any other person of African descent to vindicate the intellectual capabilities of that race, would be interesting and perhaps useful to my country people, and, without doubt, lucrative to him.

I remarked that the time seemed short to see so large a country, and I asked him whether, instead of making a story, or, as he called it, a *Roman*, he had not better give the world the benefit of his personal observations; that it was an historical epoch with us, and that the events occurring every week transcended in interest and importance anything legitimately available for romance.

To this he made no direct reply, but went on to say that the idea he had formed was to enter into relations with some bookseller to write a four-volume work of some sort, and sell it by subscription. He said, also, that

he had several invitations to correspond with the press. I advised him to enter into no arrangement with any bookseller till his book was completed, for he could scarcely tell till he had done it what sort of a book it would be. I recommended him to keep his pen free to make such a book as a visit to the United States might inspire him to make, and, when made, to sell it in the best market he could find; and I invoked the example of de Tocqueville, who, in his private letters, frequently congratulated himself that he had forborne to publish his first impressions about America, but had waited till they had had time to ripen. Time and reflection, I said, will often suggest to the most experienced traveler things to add and correct which sometimes determine the fortunes and usefulness of a book.

In reply to these remarks, he for the first time betrayed to me his African blood. He said he never corrected anything; he wrote *dans l'abondance*, and sent his manuscript to the printer without looking it over; that he had never re-read anything he had written in his life, except in proof. My MS., he said, is without an erasure; if I get to altering and correcting, I always end by throwing it into the fire and beginning anew. I will show you one of my MSS. With that he called his secretary, a dark-eyed, dark-haired, and intellectual-looking young gentleman of some twenty-two years, and requested him to bring him a chapter of *San Felice*. The secretary presently returned with some fifty or sixty pages of quarto MS., which he placed in my hands. There was scarcely an erasure or a correction in it from beginning to end, and what surprised me more, the writing was in a clear, round hand, and not at all like the current French chirography. It was as legible as print.

I subsequently learned some facts about Dumas' literary habits, which render it a little less than absolutely certain that I really saw his MS. in the package that was shown to me. His secretary, it is said, writes so much like the great romancer that no one but an expert could distinguish the MS. of the one from that of the other. His son, and, indeed, many others, are said to possess this accom-

plishment as well. In other words, Dumas is in the habit of putting his name to romances he has scarcely read, much less written. He sometimes published in a single year more volumes than the most rapid penman could copy in twice that time. For example, in 1845, sixty volumes, purporting to be the work of his pen, were issued from the Parisian press. The copying alone of half of them could not have been done by a single man in a year. The remainder, be they more or less, were done by others, at first under his name alone, and later under the joint name of himself and their authors.*

In showing me his MS. he may have had it in his mind to disabuse mine of any impression I might have received of his ploughing with other people's heifers, by showing the MS. of a work which he had but recently finished. I had no doubt then that it was his, nor have I much doubt now, though unhappily his calling it his was in itself by no means conclusive proof. Whether his or not, I fully believe that he wrote *dans l'abondance*, as he said, and did not revise. There was where the African came in. He had no reflective faculties. The moment he began to correct he became confused, and the train of his thought was irrecoverably broken. He had to run down, like a clock, as he was wound up, and without stopping. It is the peculiarity of the African that, for want of the reflective and logical faculties, he is incapable, except in rare instances, of measuring distance, size, or time, or of thoroughly mastering the common rules of arithmetic. Dumas' blood was not sufficiently strained, or shall I say corrupted, to be an exception in this respect. At school he could never be made

* Dumas had a sort of manufactory of plays and romances in Paris at one time, not unlike the cheese factories of New England. His part of the work consisted in giving it his name, and perhaps its title. One of his most faithful and fertile collaborators, Auguste Maquet, is said to have contributed not less than eighty volumes to the stock of the concern. Dumas is reported to have taken yet greater liberties with printed works. His appropriations, in one way or another, of other writers' labors, got him into several duels and as many lawsuits, from none of which was he so fortunate as to retire with quite all the character he embarked in them.

to learn arithmetic, and the greatest difficulty was found in getting a little Latin into his head. He excelled, however, in hunting birds' nests, snaring game, poaching, riding horses, fencing, and pistol-shooting, and it was in gratifying these propensities that he acquired the hardy constitution which three-score years of a by no means exemplary life had failed in the least to impair.

To my inquiry if he spoke English, he replied that he read it a little, but he added, *ma maitresse est Anglaise, et elle me fera parler toute de suite.* I looked at him again to see if I had not misunderstood him, and if he had not meant his valet, but he went on to say that he had taught her French, and that she was only waiting till her accent was perfect to appear at the opera.

He wished to know how much he would require for his expenses during his absence, and if 2,000 francs a month would be enough. I told him that if he took but one servant and no woman it would.

While we were discussing these matters the door opened, and in walked a young lady whom he addressed cordially as Madame, and presented to me. She saluted me in idiomatic English. A glance at her convinced me that she was the *maitresse* who was to endow him with the requisite English for his transatlantic excursion. She seemed to be about twenty years of age, of regular features, and, but that her head over the forehead was too flat, would have been beautiful. I did not hear her name, if it was pronounced, but she told me, I think, that one of her parents was Irish; that she had given concerts in America; and she showed me a letter from a Mr. Thompson, of Cincinnati, to her, in which she was addressed as "Picciola."

Matrimony is an institution of which Dumas never comprehended the necessity or even the propriety. He was once married, but not in obedience to any conviction that there was any fitness in such formalities. It happened in this wise, say the Paris gossips. When about eighteen years of age, upon the recommendation of General Foy, who took him under his protection, he was appointed to a Secretaryship under the Duke of Orleans, afterwards Louis Philippe, at a salary of about \$250

a year. When the Duke had become King, Dumas, with the same insensibility to the distinction between a wife and a mistress which he showed in proposing to take his "Picciola" with him to America to teach him English, escorted a young actress, who had figured at several of the minor theatres of Paris, to a ball given by the young Duke of Orleans, the King's eldest son. After they had presented themselves and been received by the Duke, he said in a dignified tone to his chivalric guest:—

"Il est entendu, mon cher Dumas, que vous n'avez pu me présenter que votre femme."

These words were equivalent to an order, a disregard of which would have involved his disgrace. They were married at once; all the literary notabilities were invited on the occasion, and the austere Chateaubriand was one of the official witnesses. They soon, however, discovered that as married people they got on better separate than together; he remained in Paris and she went to Florence, where she died of an epidemic.

We waited breakfast till 1 o'clock for the arrival of Mr. Genesco, the editor of the *Europe*, from whom a telegram then arrived informing us that he had missed the train by two minutes. The proprietor of the cottage and a professional musician were the only other guests. The honor of conducting madame to the table fell to me. The breakfast was admirably served, though it did not escape the criticism of our host. A carp, cold and more than two feet long, taken from the neighboring lake, with a sauce piquante, was followed by a hot roasted leg of delicious mutton. Then came a *ris de veau*, with tomato sauce. When Dumas was handed some he declined, saying: "Je me défie de la sauce tomate que je ne fais pas moi-même." One of the guests insisting that the sauce was very good, "Ah," replied Dumas, in a tone between a sigh and a grunt, "it is not as I like it." He afterwards remarked of another dish not entirely to his taste: "I can't quit the kitchen five minutes." After the *ris de veau*, we had crevisses, of which he ate enormously. By this time his breathing had become as distinctly audible as if it had been effected by the

aid of a high-pressure engine. I never saw a person eat so much like an animal. Grapes and pears concluded our repast, which was led to its place with champagne, claret, and some excellent Burgundy.

Soon after we had made an end of our eating and drinking, our host relapsed into a state of stertorous somnolency against which he struggled for a while manfully but in vain. I observed, however, that this was a familiar experience with the household, and was not to be noticed. Though somewhat reassured by the tranquil air of my *commensales*, I could not help feeling a little as if I were the guest of honor at one of La Fontaine's feasts of the animals. In about half an hour, however, he overcame his drowsiness, and then talked on rapidly, and sometimes eloquently, and the more he talked the better looking he became. His smile was very sweet, and there was not a sordid, or mercenary, or selfish trait in one of his features. He spoke of topics of current interest like a man of decided opinions, but evidently saw them from a very restricted rather than from a philosophic or national point of view. He said some things that were striking. The emperor, he remarked, was *un vrai conspirateur* and not a brave man, hence he did everything requiring courage in the night, and then enumerated several of his important nocturnal performances. He compared him to those beasts of prey that only seek their food at night, such as foxes, wolves, jackals, etc., and said that he had the eye of that class of animals.

The Franco-Italian Convention of the 11th Sept., which had been then recently signed, and of which the world has just witnessed the auspicious consummation, he pronounced very ingenious and quite sure to restore Italy to Rome. He spoke with great admiration of our novelist Cooper, whose works were lying on his table, and whom he professed to have known.

Before leaving St. Gratian I returned to the

subject of his projected American expedition, made proffer of such letters and counsel as might promise to be of service to him, and repeated the advice I had given him before, to make a book about the United States, and not to sell it until it was written. It was obvious that for some reason, then not quite intelligible to me, this advice was not palatable altogether.

Reflecting upon what had passed during my ride home, I came to the conclusion that his hope was that our government, following the example of several European States when in trouble, might desire to enlist his pen in its service, and that perhaps I was prepared, under the cover of a bookseller's engagement, to take him into the service of the Republic.

Speaking of his proposal, a few days later, to a distinguished member of the Institute, he told me that I should caution all to whom I gave him letters not to lend him money, for, said he, he will levy upon every one of them, *il est un grand mangeur*, and always in want of money. This, he added, is so notoriously his character that I feel no remorse in warning you of it. He thought, however, Dumas might make a good book, and perhaps, under the circumstances, a useful one.

I need hardly add that I never offered Dumas any special inducements to visit America, or that he never executed the project about which he consulted me. Neither did he ever renew the subject with me nor with any one else that I know of. His sceptre was already broken and his literary influence was rapidly passing away. During the winter succeeding my visit to St. Gratian he tried to trade a little upon his past reputation and notoriety, by lecturing; but his success did not warrant him or his friends in trying the experiment more than twice. With them Dumas may be said to have closed a literary career which, brilliant as it was for a time, placed mankind under very inconsiderable obligations.